The Fragile State

Susan Pollock

In his most recent book, James Scott presents us with a 'deep history' of the alluvial lowlands of Mesopotamia, from early domestications in the Neolithic to the emergence and consolidation of early states. Although the focus lies on Mesopotamia in these periods, Scott delves into the beginnings of the human use of fire in the Palaeolithic and draws on comparative developments in Southeast Asia, Egypt, Greece, Rome and elsewhere. He poses large questions: Why did people move into densely packed villages—'Neolithic multispecies resettlement camps'—accompanied by the plants and animals they domesticated, but also by an exponentially increased disease load and a substantial portion of drudgery? Why did states emerge when they did, despite the fact that the main ecological and demographic conditions were present millennia earlier? What accounts for the fragility of these early states, and why do our standard histories obscure that fact? Guiding themes are ecological and demographic, but also draw explicit attention to the unintended consequences of human actions. Indeed, reflections on the Anthropocene underpin the book's arguments, and, like many others who write on this topic, Scott is motivated by deep-seated concerns about the sorry ecological state of our contemporary world and connections to long-term effects of human activity.

This is no standard narrative of progress and a steady 'rise of civilization'. For Scott, a Neolithic way of life was not part and parcel of a linear, irreversible development, sedentism was not naturally superior to mobility, states were (and are) neither natural formations nor inevitable developments, and when they emerged they were not territorially extensive, but rather included large, unadministered areas inhabited by what he terms barbarians.

Scott turns his attention first to human control over fire and the wide-ranging effects of fire on the landscape, from clearing vegetation to bringing about the concentration of resources in a limited space. Neolithic transformations led to the crowding together of people, plants and animals in communities that in turn became breeding grounds for diseases. Scott asks what the origins, structure and consequences of this agrarian ecological complex were. He concludes that domestication was not simply a human-driven process that radically changed plants and animals, but also worked in the reverse—humans were domesticated by their own creations. So, for example, the drudgery and scheduling requirements of an annual agricultural cycle disciplined humans to structure their lives accordingly. In this respect, Scott's arguments are not unlike those of Ian Hodder in *Entangled* (2012), although Scott is less willing to read an inevitability into this mutual entanglement.

Early states emerged long after the appearance of sedentary agrarian communities. Perhaps, Scott suggests, this was the result of climate change, but the trigger(s) does not play a major role in Scott's narrative. Rather, he is principally concerned with how states worked, arguing that they were fragile entities that exerted limited control over their territory and their populations. They were in turn surrounded by a sea of barbarians who were not subject to state control, and they were engaged in constant struggles to prevent their subjects from deserting to the barbarians. Managing people and resources was predicated on a grain-based economy, since cereals have predictable harvest times that allowed for easy control, taxation, storage and rationing.

The limited control exercised by early states and their fundamental fragility are key themes in Scott's narrative. He focuses on the interstices, the decentralized elements, the barbarians. The constrained power of Mesopotamian states is rarely emphasized to the extent that Scott does, although occasionally scholars have drawn attention to the geography and temporal interstices of the presumptive central powers, as Robert McCormick Adams (2008) did in his examination of the city-state of Umma in the late third millennium BC. Scott offers a healthy dose of scepticism towards the standard civilizational narrative that is in thrall to uncritical readings of texts written by scribes ensconced in the urban centres of power and who cast ideologically laden scorn on uncivilized elements of society. Here, too, Scott remarks perceptively on the dual problem of archaeologists' tendency to train their research lens toward the grand and spectacular rather than the modest and quotidian, but he also notes the differential visibility of material traces of the powerful *versus* the weak, what Reinhard Bernbeck (2005, 112–14) has referred to as political taphonomy.

Scott's stance is a salutary reminder of the endemic weak sovereignty and fragility of early states and the larger implications of these conditions. It allows him to sidestep the implied determinism of, for example, Ian Morris' (2010) approach to long-term history. But at the same time, the state as an institutional form has shown itself to

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be remarkably resilient. Although 'dark ages' and times of 'collapse' may indeed be signs of 'a bolt for freedom by many state subjects and an improvement in human welfare' (p. 209), new states and new centres of power (re-) formed repeatedly. What led to their continuation over the millennia, their growing strength and size, if life in states was so unattractive? Similar questions could be asked regarding the long-term legacy of Neolithic transformations in subsistence strategies and mobility.

A key element of early states in Scott's understanding of them is the centrality of unfree labour, needed to ensure the production of surplus, but also part and parcel of keeping state subjects 'at home'. He suggests that slavery played a greater role than scholars generally attribute to it. That contention remains, as he acknowledges, a controversial one, revolving around matters of definition and terminology, as well as the evaluation of sources. What is required, I would argue, and what Scott addresses briefly, is acknowledgement of the wide variety of conditions of being 'unfree' that apparently existed in early Mesopotamian states and an attentiveness to the different experiences of those inhabiting such positions.

Drawing on his earlier work in *Seeing Like a State*, Scott underscores the ways in which early states worked to simplify aspects of the worlds they sought to bend to their will. Central to his discussion here is the ecological simplification of the landscape that came about with an emphasis on cereal farming and reduction of the diversity of the subsistence base. This discussion offers a healthy antidote to the long-standing concentration on the growth of complexity as part of a hypothesized civilizational process, and Scott's argument resonates with David Wengrow's (2001) on the long-term simplification of aesthetic labour in the realm of food consumption. But it leaves only partially answered the question of why simplification characterized specific realms, or perhaps more importantly, where and how this simplification allowed other aspects of state power to become more complex. Simplification is, as Scott readily acknowledges, a political act that makes coherence out of diversity and messiness. It also makes our historical narratives possible by silencing, glossing over and selecting. I return to this point below.

Scott is deeply wedded to an approach that today is increasingly derided in some circles as anthropocentric. Strangely, however, the social is often obscured in his narrative. For example, the crucial importance of fire is that it clears land, concentrates resources and helps make foods more easily consumable by the human digestive tract. But the hearth as both a metaphor for and a concrete place of socializing and commensality finds no place here. What does unfree labour, or the heavy investment in cereal agriculture, imply for people's experiences? How did they lead to restructuring their social interactions with family, neighbours and other social groups? Ultimately, I would argue, we need to bring the large scale down to the human scale and to address the question of how history unfolded for differently positioned groups of people (Robb & Pauketat 2013).

This brings me to my final and at the same time most fundamental point, that of the place of long-term, large-scale histories. I have elsewhere expressed my disquiet with such narratives, on the grounds that they inevitably paint with broad brushstrokes over the complexities and nuances of history in an effort to produce a coherent account (Pollock 2013). My concern is not primarily about 'getting the facts wrong', although in a so-called 'post-factual' world, such issues are not trivial. Scott states that his book is meant as a provocation and a stimulus for further research: history is, he contends, the most subversive discipline, because it tells us how things we take for granted came to be and reveals the contingencies in that process. But long-term histories themselves have agendas that should not be left unexamined. What happens to the bits that do not fit, to the actors whose ways of life do not mesh with those of the masses? Scott engages with this issue, most explicitly in his treatment of barbarians who were not part of the centralized state. But such groups are themselves diverse, and they by no means exhaust the spectrum of past actors and positions. How did childhood and growing up change under the shadow of the state, and how did it differ among barbarians? What did it mean to be a woman, a mother, a sister in these different environments? Increasingly, archaeologists have turned to microhistories and other small-scale analyses of specific sectors of ancient societies. Can these be articulated with large-scale histories such as Scott's without being swallowed up by the logic of a well-structured and argued narrative?

I want to stress this last point: Scott writes a highly engaging and persuasive account. It is a pleasure to read and to think about—and, for that reason, seductive and perhaps a little dangerous. I happen to agree with the broad outlines of Scott's arguments regarding early Mesopotamian states, but I nonetheless feel the need to step back and reflect on how the book affects both an archaeological and a wider readership. Narratives such as his take on lives of their own, they become taken for granted—just as is the case for the grand narratives of the growth of civilization that Scott rightly critiques. As Robb and Pauketat (2013, 31) remark, all abstractions from the concrete to the general involve acts of selection, of authority and power. How do we preserve the sense of history as subversive, as an examination of paths once trodden that were abandoned or suppressed, as an intellectual undertaking that pushes us to see the multiplicity of ways in which our world could (have) be(en) otherwise?

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Still Waiting for the Barbarians

Adam T. Smith

> I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid on them.
>
> J. M. Coetzee (1982)

It seems almost preordained that James Scott, a scholar who moves with profound agility between the worlds of anthropology and political science, should eventually work his way onto the intellectual terrain of the barbarian. Barbarians play a foundational role in the formation of both disciplines, populating both anthropology's 'savage slot' (Trouillot 2003) and political science's prelapsarian 'state of nature' (Palmeri 2016). In Scott's most recent book, *Against the Grain*, the barbarians who helped to shape the world's earliest states play a variety of consequential roles. They are at once the forces of resistance to centralizing power, the refugees seeking respite from sovereignty's infringements and the brigands of the borderlands who provide the slave labour and mercenaries that prop up the fragile state.

For those familiar with Scott's earlier work, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, the barbarians in *Against the Grain* bear a striking resemblance to Zomia's 'barbarians by design' (Scott 2009), denizens of borderlands forged by the twinned processes of 'state evasion' and 'state prevention'. Scott's excursion to antiquity anchors his analysis of ungoverned spaces in a deep past where it productively upends the long-standing historical assumption that the rise of civilization was met by a global chorus of cheers. However, in reshaping our understanding of the perils of state making, *Against the Grain* also argues for a consequential rethinking of those outside the early state's reach, the barbarians, a revisionist project that warrants closer scrutiny.

Scott uses the term 'barbarian' as a cheeky shorthand for any individual external to the demands of the state. The Classical tradition, which bequeathed us the term, also defined the barbarian as a political category, a moral and aesthetic antipode to the citizen, an ignoble and rude 'slave by nature', fit only to be ruled (Aristotle *Politics* 1252b). And yet alongside the contemptible barbarian lay its double, a romantic figure panegyrized in a primitivist tradition that stretches from Homer to Tacitus and eventually to Herder and Nietzsche. These barbarians are noble innocents, brave, 'blameless' (*Iliad* 1.423), 'the most righteous of men' (*Iliad* 13.6). They are tragic figures, bygone authentic humans whose 'nature was still natural' (Nietzsche 1989, 201), unburdened by the renunciation of instincts demanded by civilization (Freud 1969, 66).

Barbarians, as the original citizens of the state of nature, have thus long been understood as the point of origin for political order, driving a civilizing process that elevates us from the originary *bellum omnia contra omnes* of the primordial horde (i.e. Hobbes) even as it alienates the species from our natural humanity (i.e. Rousseau). What the barbarians of Classical and Modern thought share is their formation within an ethnographic image of the Other, from Herodotian observations of Scythians to colonial encounters in the New World. They have thus traditionally been understood as primitive forms destined to be exiled by the logics of inexorable expansion native to the state and civilization.

Archaeology has already done considerable work to undermine the place of the barbarian in the apostolic ordering of social evolution, and indeed much of that effort

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